

The arts

Protesting art exhibits is what's obscene

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OF ALL the issues that cross the artist's horizon, none is more fearsome than the threat of censorship. The spectacle of public officials, untrained and insensitive in art, removing, condemning, or destroying works of art arouses fear and resentment like nothing else.

Within the past year we have had pointed reminders. In Cincin-

Analysis

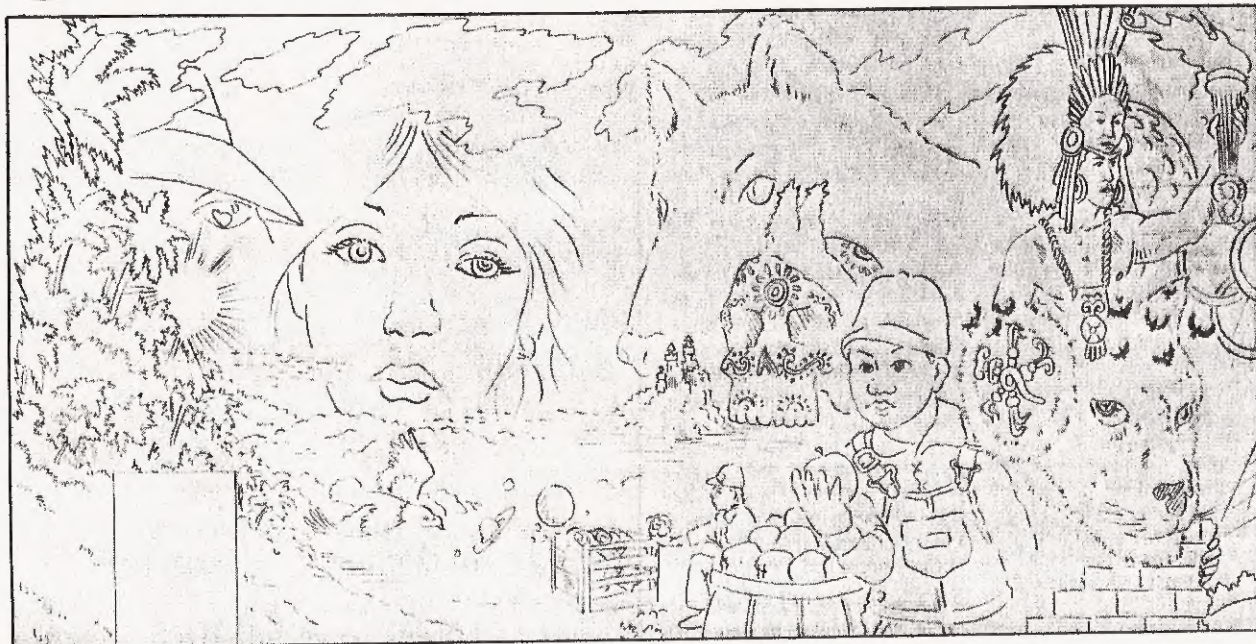
nati, the trial of the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibitors resulted in acquittal and an ignominious defeat for the censors. In the Los Angeles County Art Museum, there has been a hugely successful exhibit of the work by artists which were suppressed by the Nazis.

Locally, we have seen our own county officials ordering the removal of a piece of ceramic sculpture and several photographs from exhibit space in the Santa Cruz County Governmental Center, a controversial exhibit in the Watsonville City Hall, and a kind of pre-censoring of a proposed mural at Watsonville High School.

A place such as a government center doing routine business with the public may have different criteria for its art exhibits than a museum or art gallery. Still, if they are going to show art at all, they should not automatically exclude work that has a little flavor to it. The public doesn't have to have vanilla all the time.

Each of these local cases is different, and should be looked at individually.

The exhibit at the Watsonville City Hall was selected to coincide with Cinco de Mayo, yet what it



This is a section of the Watsonville High School mural that caused such a controversy.

has to do with that holiday or with Mexican tradition is hard to fathom, other than it deals with subject matter south of the border. It is a portfolio of posters of a highly political and specific nature dealing with the plight of women in El Salvador. Since it was created by an Oakland-based activist group, "Taller sin Fronteras," and has some Yankee Go Home flavor, it was bound to find its critics. Yet it is a powerful example of poster art — colorful and unified, combining word and image to send a clear message. Its plea for justice is not inappropriate for a city hall, which purports to deal in that elusive commodity.

The high school mural is not so much a censorship as an attempt by a committee to create some-

thing which wouldn't offend anybody in a highly diverse community. The first cartoons were too "Hispanic," whatever that means, and the students who are creating it are trying to add some non-Hispanic elements. They are getting a valuable lesson in the type of direction that has plagued commercial artists forever.

At the County Governmental Center, a ceramic piece depicting a phallic symbol in a lily — basically a harmless pun — was removed. Next, a big show of photographs on the first floor was targeted. The exhibit, "Peace Begins at Home," is designed to celebrate Peace Day, and is a handsome and inspiring collection of work by local photographers. Three prints

were removed from the exhibit because bare female breasts are visible.

As usual, the censors target the wrong thing, and for the wrong reasons. Typically, they invoke children, as if some imagined trauma might happen if a child sees an undraped breast. This is a gross underestimation of children. After all, a child's deepest and most pleasant memories involve the mother's anatomy. Covered or not, kids know what's there.

This is an ironic hypocrisy in a society where children are inundated with TV and movies which are replete with graphic glorification of the most brutal kinds of violence.

Catherina Marlowe, Shmuel

Thaler and Robert Tager, whose works were removed, are artists of great sensitivity, whose work could be considered offensive only by the most Medieval of standards. The photographs were an integral part of an exhibit which made important statements about peace. Their removal leaves the show incomplete.

That public officials should be responsible for what is shown within the spaces under their care cannot be denied. But in listening to and acting on the complaints of a vocal few who find the work not bland enough, they ignore the rights of others who believe that art, humanity and justice should not be separated.